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PSYCHOLOGY OF THE HIGH SCHOOL¹

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The modern, up-to-date city high school is a unit of somewhat complex character. It is in reality a small city, populated with the embryo citizens of the nation. In the school, the American youth is molded and fitted to become a useful man or woman. As a Freshman he is received, a green and unknown quantity, a store-room of latent power of which he himself is not aware, and in his four years in the school this same dynamic energy is uncovered and groomed, its rough edges smoothed and its weak spots bolstered until finally the graduate is presented to the world, ready to take up his share of its burdens or to prepare himself further in college and university.

Small wonder then that the life of the boy or girl while in the high school must be carefully watched and supervised. Small wonder that those inborn tendencies for action which all humans possess must be carefully guided and directed into proper channels. School authorities are realizing that an education consists of more than mere drill in mathematics, science, and language. They are beginning to appreciate the demand for social expansion and growth, and to this end social psychology is devoted.

Our own school, one of the larger ones of the state, has furnished an opportunity for the study of various problems, and it will in the future, no doubt, serve as a working ground for the experiment of various social systems. Perhaps one or two general examples taken from our school life will serve to illustrate the fallacy of cultivating only the book side of education. It is probable that the spirit of uneasiness and the general restlessness that

¹ Prepared as a class report by a Senior in the Decatur High School in a course on psychology given by the principal, Thomas M. Deam. It presents so well a student's point of view that it is published after deleting a few paragraphs which are of purely local significance. [Editor.]

pervaded our school in 1918-19 were due partly to the lack of opportunity for students to utilize their excess energy. The institution was blessed with over one thousand energetic, impetuous boys and girls, eager to be active, resenting confinement, and craving companionship. At the same time the school was devoid of any constructive social program, all things of this nature being taken care of by the various societies which catered exclusively to their limited memberships. As a result, this pent-up energy was given no legitimate outlet, so eventually escaped through sporadic outbursts of vandalism. Contrast that, then, with conditions today. With more students, but with an organized system of social recreation, the school has prospered in ways even far removed from the social side. Dancing, hitherto taboo, was instituted and completely revolutionized social activity. The student organization was given charge of arrangements and, inasmuch as the committees were students themselves, it was easy to diagnose the wants of the student body. In short, the entire attitude has changed, work has gone on more smoothly, and refractory evil-doers have been reduced to a minimum.

Our experience in Decatur has been paralleled in numerous other schools throughout Illinois. In Chicago, one high school, which is much larger than our own, experienced the same trouble for many years, and finally when an organized social program was introduced, the student body acclaimed it an unqualified success. Another Chicago school which could not boast a social program solved its problems by providing club facilities for boys and girls, sponsoring afternoon dances, and enlarging and improving the social life of the school. In a high school in Los Angeles, California, one of the most perfect self-governing bodies of students in the country exists. All social activity is under the jurisdiction of the student organization and the wonderful success of this high school is testimonial enough of the wisdom of the student-government plan in social activity.

Thus it becomes apparent that relaxation and social recreation in the high school are of paramount importance. Consider the manner in which these principles of social psychology must be applied and the way in which they affect students of various ages.

No two individuals are alike, and furthermore the same individual undergoes great changes. With this in view the psychological principles must be applied accordingly. It is logical and easily seen that the methods by which a child in the grades is disciplined, entertained, or instructed would avail little if used with high-school pupils. But there is even a finer distinction than this. The first two years of the high-school life of a boy or girl produce but little outward change. They are still addicted to the hoydenish pastimes and boisterous tendencies peculiar to all normal youngsters. The true dignity of the institution has not as yet exerted its sobering influence, and they are still to pass from the childish into the more mature state. It is natural, therefore, that the younger students in the lower classes do not enter as enthusiastically into the more or less arbitrary social functions as do their older brethren. They make their own society, choose their own companions, and set their own standards. They are content to amuse themselves in their own way, so the more elaborate gatherings appeal to them only as something new and unique.

But in the Sophomore, Junior, and Senior years things are different. The period of adolescence has passed; the mental side of the student has developed and expanded; and he thinks more clearly and logically. He is more active in a constructive way and demands an outlet for the energy which his new-found strength has developed, so it is here that the direction of these energies into useful channels is important; or, in other words, the science of knowing how to handle this element is of value, and this science of social conditions is really social psychology.

The task of outlining a social program for next year is rather difficult and uncertain since there are several new elements that must be given consideration. However, there are a few general things which the social committees would do well to consider. The social committee of the student organization should itself be more fully organized. At least two standing committees should be appointed, one to act as a detail committee, which shall attend to all details which may arise in the line of that committee's duties, and an executive committee, which shall be charged with the duty of planning and arranging the various functions coming under the

jurisdiction of the social committee. For instance, in the giving of the noon-day parties, the detail committee should be responsible for the orchestra, the conduct of the dancing, watching the doors, publicity, and other matters of this sort, thus relieving the chairman of the responsibility. The executive or advisory committee should formulate all plans and arrangements and direct the action of the main committee.

In carrying out their plans for next year the social committee should include an ample number of dancing parties for those who care for this form of amusement. By all means continue the dances. The noon-day parties were successful enough to warrant their continuation, and some phase of this plan should be adopted. The Friday afternoon parties could be held more frequently. All these should be vigorously pushed, but there is one thing that was lacking this year that should be given due consideration, and that is social functions for those who do not dance. There are perhaps 75 per cent of the enrolled students of the high school who cannot, or at least do not, dance, and some provision should be made for these. Possibly it would be well to appoint a standing committee from the larger one to care for these parties alone. This committee should be entirely exempt from other work, and should devote their time to the planning and execution of these special parties. There is enough talent in the high school to provide an hour's entertainment any time. Music, humorous readings, and talks could be given, and these, with one or two good comedy sketches or vaudeville acts by proficient students, would furnish a splendid entertainment, and would leave those who do not dance with the feeling that they had not been slighted. Do not try to do too many things at once, or at least do not expect the chairman to do all the work for the whole committee. A well-organized, efficient, constructive social program will accomplish wonders in the school, so it will be well to place the most responsible students in charge of the social activities, give them authority, and demand results.